

# Event marketing and Covid 19: Navigating the digital divide is the new reality (albeit virtual)

 By [Melissa Bender](#)

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The trade fairs and exhibitions industry was never meant for the faint-hearted. From the ebb and flow of economic strain in a competitive landscape to the uncontrollables that could make or break your event, destroy a brand or demolish a team - if it's not resilient enough to roll with the punches. Fortunately, I work with a strong team of individuals from marketing and sales to finance and operations, that has learnt to use the energy of each strike to power our next move.



Image credit: Marcus Aurelius on [Pexels](#).

On 5 March, still basking in the success of an event that ended a mere four days earlier, South Africa confirmed its first case of Covid-19. My team and I had to consider the potential impact on our upcoming events. The very next week a decision was made to postpone an event scheduled to take place in June. Surely our July event would be unscathed? It's in July after all!

## Not doom and gloom just yet

We considered the potential impacts in January already, but we certainly never foresaw the ferociousness with which this was coming. South Africa normally side steps these things. This time, few of us have been spared. So here we are, alongside many, in the trenches. Planning, re-planning and most importantly, innovating. A global pandemic in 2020 was certainly not on any company's SWOT analysis.

An industry dependent on public gatherings, international travel and face-to-face meetings cannot defend itself against closed borders, social distancing and a nationwide lockdown. A quick turnaround or flattened curve won't provide immediate relief, and with bated breath, we wait for a vaccine - the gateway drug to renew a once-flourishing industry.



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2020 did not go as planned and for event organisers, it's no secret that webinars and virtual exhibitions are the fall-back

plan, however, the response from marketing is slightly more complex. Event marketing teams will face a new mandate to attract visitors to a trade fair model that barely existed in January - with a fraction of the budget we were used to. Albeit a complex affair, it is not doom and gloom just yet:

- Firstly, marketing teams have the advantage of being able to work remotely and productivity should not be impacted.
- Secondly, nobody should be "waiting to see what happens", now is the time to rework the marketing strategy. We may not know exactly what the future holds, but we have a good sense of what it won't be - the world as we knew it (which is what that strategy was based on).
- Thirdly, digital transformation has been on the table for a long time, get savvy and adapt. Of course, it always comes down to the nature of the event. A medical infrastructure conference alongside exhibitors who manufacture PPE and ventilators would be fit for purpose and requires little to no marketing. It's likely to sell out faster than some other technical fairs
- Fourthly, and as mentioned there will be a difficult balancing act between the need to offer more value to exhibitors from a marketing perspective, with limited budgets. This will require a very focused, direct marketing approach, cutting out some of the 'excesses' in marketing spend.

## People are spending more time online

Right now, the stats indicate that working from home means people are also spending more time browsing online. So, you know where your audience is, the real work is getting the right messaging to them - unlike an advert or billboard which requires strategic placement in the hope that your audience will glance in that direction. Careful consideration must be taken to ensure that your marketing content is digital or transferrable into some form of online presence. Can your sales strategy be optimised for online instead of face-to-face?

It's also the time for industry experts to show their worth. Get behind them as they get behind their industry. If you don't want to get left behind, then plan that webinar either on the dates the event was meant to take place or in the near future - before the inevitable webinar fatigue hits.



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What does your SEO look like? If it's not squeaky clean, you may lose a potential client on their way to your website because Google didn't put you first. Also, the social media strategy that was prepared in January is certainly not relevant anymore. Rework, re-plan and rewrite because that messaging has to change.

One of the main challenges event marketers face is attracting international audiences. Whilst travel bans have not made this any easier, the ability to attend an event or conference in another country, in a virtual format, will be far more acceptable - even if that option was previously available, it ranked second to jet setting, to foreign lands for networking. We have the opportunity to bridge that gap.

## Digital solutions have become THE strategy

The digital age has caught up to us in so many ways, and for companies that have not embraced its potential, there is just a short window within which to re-strategise with a greater opportunity to connect with an audience that was previously out of reach.



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Whilst digital solutions were just one aspect of a marketing strategy, it has now become THE strategy. Right down to Zoom meetings in order to stay connected with your team, suppliers and clients, and task management software to avoid falling behind.

I repeat, marketing to cater to the needs of this industry is not for the faint-hearted, and the innovations to achieve your mandate should not be considered mildly. Those innovations exist and with the right amount of optimism, knowledge and implementation of solutions, we stand a fair chance of coming out of this less harmed.

In a world where we are all trying to flatten the curve, adapting and innovating your marketing strategy goes a long way towards the sustainability and upward curve of your business.

## ABOUT MELISSA BENDER

Melissa Bender is the head of marketing and a senior executive at Messe Frankfurt South Africa, a subsidiary of the third-largest event company in the world. She is an event marketing specialist with experience in the trade and consumer shows in industries such as textiles, automotive and agriculture across sub-Saharan Africa.

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